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Giftedness

A Sociological Critique From a Rural Perspective

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Abstract

This article interrogates the idea of giftedness taking a rural/spatial perspective drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. We argue that Bourdieu's framing of gifts as social phenomena illustrates problems with the way that psychologically-grounded assessments of intellectual ability are constructed and promoted. We draw on narrative analysis to illustrate how attention to place-located social gifts can serve as a robust and fertile foundation for alternatively framing giftedness as a social phenomenon. This framing, we argue, suggests the importance of inclusive school communities in which different forms of activity and conceptions of knowledge can recognize the located nature of gifts. We suggest, rather than exclusive programming for those students who are assessed as intellectually gifted, that schooling should support, celebrate and share the multiple embodied and emplaced gifts students bring to school.



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... given the slow emergence of the idea that giftedness is a socially divisive construct, this concept had enjoyed largely undisturbed ideological impunity since the mid-twentieth century. As Gabriel Mugny and Felice Carugati put it, “theories of giftedness” (popular notions, notably among parents and teachers, of what giftedness is) generally rely on an essentialist model of intelligence: giftedness is seen as the “‘astonishing’ or not easily explicable existence of differences of intelligence between individuals,” and is perceived as innate.

—Beauvais (p. 2015, 84)

There is something odd about being confronted with a group of 14-year-old students who solemnly tell you they are gifted and talented

—Fletcher-Campbell (2003, p. 4).

Social Gifts

In this paper, we raise some critical questions about giftedness and gifted education using a fairly simple and provocative idea developed by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s somewhat audacious claim is that the idea of intelligence as it is mobilized in educational settings is tantamount to racism (1984a, 1993). Here we present both an academic analysis and a personal account. About the time Mike encountered this idea, Nathan was “diagnosed” with giftedness in the small rural school he attended. Mike had no particular quarrel with the idea that Nathan is gifted. As a proud father, he could see these gifts better than any psychometrist. Mike understood that the tests that were done to provide evidence of Nathan’s gifts that would confirm his teachers’ suspicions and help them manage his difference. The problem was the idea that being gifted was somehow special or rare, located principally in the brain. Not surprisingly, in our rural village, these alleged individual gifts were restricted to Nathan and a handful of other targeted children, who happened to be the handful of children of professional middle class outliers in his small rural school in a predominantly working class community.

From here we proceed primarily in Mike’s voice shifting at the end to Nathan’s. About the same time the testing was said to reveal my son’s gifts, I read a book of essays by Bourdieu (1984). This would have been in mid 1990s, probably 1993 or 1994. The essay that struck me at the time was entitled “Le racism de l’intelligence.” I read it in French in a collection entitled *Questions de Sociologie*. As far as I knew it had not been translated into English, and so, I decided to translate it and see if someone would publish my translation. This was very slow work for me because my written French is not very strong and by the time I finished, I became aware that the whole collection had been translated into English ahead of me (Bourdieu, 1993). Still, it was an interesting exercise because by labouring over this text as a translator I had to think very carefully about what Bourdieu meant.

Bourdieu’s central argument is that what happens in educational systems is that the preexisting privilege of those who already possess it are certified as being superior and thus, deserving of their social positions. This power and privilege is essentially transmitted in schools through processes he defines in stark terms as “symbolic violence.” Key forms of symbolic violence appear in the routine assessments of intelligence and academic ability that, as Croizet

(2012) argues following Bourdieu's racial analogy, cannot be seen as innocent measures of a raw quantity of intelligence, ability, or what have you. Through the symbolic acts of judgment that take place in key institutions of education, certain individuals are supported and praised for their ways of speaking, thinking, acting, knowing when and how to be silent, and understanding when and how to respond. They are praised, in an important sense, for inhabiting social, cultural and material space into which they were born and where they learned how to use key cultural tools, which are not universally available. Most importantly perhaps, young people learn at home how to use their bodies in institutional environments, and generally, how to deport themselves.

How do they know how to do this? There is a segment in the French film *Entre Les Murs* (*The Class* in the English version) where the teacher is asked by a minority language student how one knows which linguistic choices to make to express things well (Begaudeau, 2009). The teacher stops cold and simply responds that, one just knows how to do this. It is precisely this form of unconscious knowing that Bourdieu argues is the currency in schools (*cultural capital* he calls it) that can be transformed into credentials, and then later into privileged employment and economic capital. It is the transferability of one kind of capital into another that makes capital what it is, a flexible value and a medium of exchange at the same time.

To have acquired symbolic capital more or less effortlessly is conflated, according to Bourdieu, as a marker of an innate quality of intelligence or giftedness. Socially and culturally privileged individuals are thought to simply "know" how to accomplish the song-and-dance that is understood and certified by professionals as "bright," "intelligent," "good student," "brilliant," etc. This is one form of what is described as the "natural" giftedness of the child whose ease in the academic field is fluid and flexible. There are also those children who lack social and cultural privilege, and yet, who inexplicably or even magically appear, like Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, possessing cultural capital that exceeds that of their birth families (Beauvais, 2015). These are the special children who might be identified by assessment and removed from their humble origins to take their place in the cultural and social circumstances in which their gifts ought to have placed them. Again, the gifts of these students are assumed to be innate, and educational assessments are constructed as tools that can potentially liberate these special individuals from their misaligned social class positions.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are of course others who have no idea how to accomplish these performances. They are strangers or outsiders to/in the academic field. School seems strange to them and they seem strange to those who wield power and influence in the school, at least in its official capacities. And then there is everyone in between. Those who are considered able to accomplish the task of intelligence/brilliance seemingly without effort are considered endowed with unique personalized intellectual gifts by key institutional judges including who employ allegedly objective diagnostic technologies to add weight to their judgments.

None of this is new, and the field has been subject to decades of critique relating to sloppy framing of what constituted giftedness and the correlation between social class and giftedness (Beauvais, 2015; Borland, 2005; Jonathan, 1988; Smith and Campbell, 2015). Indeed, in an important meta-analysis, Persson (2012) argues that there is little hope for a coherent transcultural idea of giftedness and that just about the only thing gifted assessments establish is a facility for information processing. The rest of what constitutes "gifts" is culture-specific, nuanced, and thus, not comparable. In this reading, what we might call gifts are spatial phenomena; they are place-located and time-specific which is part of Bourdieu's point. In other

words, giftedness as a concept might be said to have some neurological basis if the gifts we value are speed of processing. But few analyses of learning and schooling would fit with such a narrow notion.

Bourdieu's work offers a conceptual frame within which to situate the established critique of innate or dispositional giftedness as well as the alternative non-essentialist framing of 'multiple gifts' or intelligences (Gardner, 2011).¹ Gifts, whether they are singular or multiple are applied situationally, and the situations in which children live are highly diverse. Bourdieu argues that what is actually going in the assignment of a gifted label to particular children has very little to do with individual proclivities and a great deal to do with what he calls "social gifts." It is no surprise that those who are designated gifted are, for the most part, the children of privileged classes. In France, they are the children of people who themselves have been successful in the country's highly structured education system. His analysis of social reproduction in French schools in the 1970s provides the objective data to make the case. Most of the best students, those considered to be endowed with giftedness, are simply exercising the linguistic, literary, behavioral and economic gifts given to them in their families.

These are social gifts that have less to do with any innate intelligence than with a socially derived sense of how to act. There is also a considerable literature that focusses on middle-class parenting practices, particularly within deregulated, choice-focused educational markets. This literature critiques and develops nuance around the seminal work of Ball (2003) and Vincent (Ball and Vincent, 2006) on the ways that select parents prepare their children for educational success by employing what Lareau (2003) calls "concerted cultivation." Cultivation practices amount to investments in the enhancement of the sensibilities of children that range from academic lessons and tutoring, travel, and cultural engagements, to the subtler arts of managing service providers like teachers. More recent work has explored the multiple ways that dispositions (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2013, Maxwell and Vincent, 2015), self-understandings of privilege and dessert (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009), and friendship networks (Carolan, 2015) are developed by family "choice" practices to both support and reinforce the academic performance of advantaged children.

In fact, it might be argued that intelligence itself is a concept that can only be thought about in a particular context and that there is no legitimate way to abstract its characteristics out of the practices of the lifeworld and the diverse fields nested within it (Corbett, 2008). For instance: a) the intensive and intimate reading that is normal in highly literate families; b) the relatively formal and standard language patterns learned in the family from birth which either matches (or is more refined than) that of the child's teachers; c) growing up in a house that is full of books and other forms of school-like print; d) the visual examples of people quietly reading these texts on a regular and sustained basis; e) the "distance from necessity" and "tastes" that allow a family home to contain a wide variety high status cultural materials; f) access to theatres,

¹ This is the more radically liberal notion that all children are gifted which calls on teachers to establish how children are intelligent rather than how intelligent they are. There are interesting, and we think important, implications for this thesis as well. If intelligence is not essentialized as a dispositional attribute, then its ubiquity, which is spread across different domains can also relate to class position. For instance, is it quite common to hear in rural schools that children from farming and fishing families are naturally disposed to working with their hands, i.e. that they possess kinesthetic intelligence. This "intelligence" then renders them "suitable" for vocational rather than academic programming (Corbett and Baeck, 2016; Down, Smyth and Robertson, 2017). The resultant programming, differentiation, or streaming can be quite similar to what typically follows on from essentialized assessments.

galleries, museums, etc. The list could obviously go on, and indeed it does in Bourdieu's voluminous writings particularly following the publication of *Distinction* in 1984.

The final rub is that when practices such as daily reading and book purchasing are forced or done for reasons other than a love of books and a desire to share this love with children, it tends not to work very well. In this situation, these "schooled" practices² tend to lack authentic emotional engagement as well as actual grounding in the ordinary routines of family life. One might buy a child a set of wrenches for instance, because one believes s/he should know about auto mechanics. But if these tools are seldom or never used in the home, it will be difficult for a parent to help a youngster acquire skill with them, or to acquire a lived sense of the field of auto mechanics.

As the child of two university educated teachers who made the unlikely choice of living in a tiny rural village rather than in the nearby town where most of the teachers and middle class professionals in the district congregated, Nathan's difference was apparent. He was certainly an unusual child because he came from a family addicted to books and to reading, and whose language at the time he started school was pitched in a particular standard dialect familiar in the academic field and which diverged markedly from the localized dialects of his peers. He also had little experience in the knowledge spaces of boyhood in the community given that he had lived temporarily in other places. He also lacked the kinship networks that both integrate a child into the structures of play and the peripheral participation in local communities of practice and the linguistic learning spaces of extended family and rural childhood. In the world of the community and its habitual practices for young boys, Nathan was an outsider. But in the world of school, a place that mirrored his own education-focussed home, he was in his element speaking comfortably with the teachers in what was considered to be a language far beyond his years.

So yes, Nathan did receive certain gifts that caused him to move through most of the academic parts of his schooling with relative ease. Ease is actually a big part of what Bourdieu was describing in his analysis of social giftedness. The practices and performances and demeanour that are defined as gifts are displayed and enacted, not through the intervention of school, but rather in a way that appears natural. To be considered gifted, one does not need to be taught, in fact, if one has to be taught, s/he not in possession of gifts at all, but rather the schooled sensibility that results from deliberate and "forced" learning. These children are loved and supported by their teachers, for the most part, so long as they are not disruptive or choose to use their gifts to cause "trouble." Finding these supposedly rare children is, of course, a significant rationale for giftedness education given that "bright" children represent not only wasted potential, but also talent which unchannelled, can result in significant trouble. For Bourdieu, the working class kid whose natural language is the vernacular of the rural community, may labour and study to achieve a semblance of the more refined language valorized in the academic field, but s/he will never quite strike quite the right register and will always seem a bit forced and/or inconsistent which is something that will be easily recognized by those who judge true cultural ability. Bourdieu was such a child himself as he reveals in interviews and

² What I mean here is that in many cases parents who themselves do not read fiction for instance may buy books for their children to read and to read to their children, but unless this activity is an authentic part of the parents' lives, it will appear to all concerned as an obligation or something that is "good for" children rather than an ordinary pleasurable experience in itself.

biographies (Reed-Danahay, 2005), and so was I.³ School made us particular types of cultural insider-outsiders in the academy and perhaps stimulated sociological interest in the way that schools have tended to reproduce social class privilege.

There is a lot more that could be said about language and symbolic power, and particularly about Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence, but the point we want to make here is that the designation of one group of people as gifted, and the reality that most of those who are labeled this way come from privileged families with considerable and diverse capital. Imagine two children entering a classroom, one with a wallet full of school-ready cultural capital to be spent. This cultural capital can be transformed into credentials that will "take" the child somewhere and allow him or her to "go far" in the academic field and into the labour market. The "other" child enters with a wallet that can sometimes be considered empty by teachers. We have heard teachers say things like, "s/he doesn't know anything at all" to describe a rural child whose knowledge is not visible in the context of school and not aligned with the pedagogies and curricular instruments employed in the classroom.

This whole process is violent and unfair because it systematically privileges the children who come from backgrounds of cultural (and often economic) advantage. It rewards them for being who they are, having the parents they do, and for speaking in the fashion of those from whom they learned language as young children. For Bourdieu, this is essentially the same as racism because it mobilizes the processes of schooling to create what he calls (drawing on Max Weber) a "theodicy of their own privilege" for the dominant classes by claiming that this privilege is innate.

Ce racism est propre à une classe dominante dont la reproduction dépend, pour une part, de la transmission du capital culturel, capital hérité qui a pour propriété d'être un capital incorporé, donc apparemment naturel, inné. Le racisme de l'intelligence est ce par quoi les dominants visent à produire une "théodicée de leur propre privilège", comme dit Weber, c'est-à-dire une justification de l'ordre social qu'ils dominent. Il est ce qui fait que les dominants se sentent justifiés d'exister comme dominants ; qu'ils se sentent d'une essence supérieure (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 264)

This racism is characteristic of a dominant class whose reproduction depends, in one sense, on the transmission of cultural capital which is an inherited capital that has the property of being an embodied and thus apparently natural and innate. The racism of intelligence is the means through which those who dominate aim to produce a theodicy of their own privilege, or as Weber put it, in other words, a justification of the order that they dominate. It is what causes the dominant class to feel justified in their own dominant position and feel as though they are essentially superior. (Mike's translation)

The designation of giftedness, which appears relatively innocent and even progressive in the sense that it represents a "differentiation" or an "inclusive" individualization, can be seen in this light to reinforce the existing social order and distribution of cultural, symbolic and

³ For a recent discussion of this outsider sensibility in a rural context, J. D. Vance's (2016) *Hillbilly Elegy* which is a thought-provoking and controversial read.

economic resources. At the time Nathan's assessment, the school psychologist who tested him was shocked when Mike suggested that the enriched program suggested for him be given to all of the children in the class and that it may not be a good idea to separate a small handful of allegedly gifted children of the professional middle classes along with "misplaced" Matildas (the two other children identified were girls) from working class families. In the end, Nathan did receive the special program and he enjoyed having an opportunity to explore his passions and, in a sense, be allowed to "improvise" (Corbett, 2013; Corbett, Vibert and Green, 2016), or to negotiate (Boomer, Onore, Lester and Cook, 1998) his curriculum. Why this opportunity is withheld from all children remains an open question.

Gifts in Place and Space The Job They Were Trying To Get Me To Do

Bourdieu points us toward a sociological understanding of giftedness that critiques the idea that individualized intellectual differences account for differences in the cognitive ability of individuals. For Bourdieu, to speak of giftedness in this way is akin to racism because it amounts to inferring from the behavior of socially advantaged or disadvantaged individuals that these differences can be explained through individual brain function. What our extrapolation of Bourdieu's ideas suggests as well that intelligence can be understood spatially or in reference to places where a particular gift is employed.

Nathan had little access to the knowledge forms and the socially embedded practices where local knowledge was used, and indeed, where local judgments about intelligence were also made. Instead, he was skilled in what Basil Bernstein (1999) called the "vertical discourses" which organize knowledge in decontextualized theoretical/conceptual categories. Within the cultural context of our rural community where "horizontal discourses" of place-based knowledge were most valued, his gifts disappeared. There are many examples we could present to make the point from research and from our own lives in several rural communities. Intelligence, as Tim Ingold (2013) points out, is both distributed in space and also implicated in the making of things in the production and reproduction of material space (Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuk, 2011; Malafouris, 2013). The things that are made do not arrive out of the ether, and this is part of the problem with schooling identified more than a century ago by Dewey, who saw that schools tend to be structured as abstracted and largely artificial learning arenas designed to prepare the child for doings and makings in the future.

The things that are made in school are very particular sorts of objects that are understood and valued in some homes, and in some communities, but not in others. Think about the textbook, the worksheet, the test, or even the "project." Analogous or similar objects may exist outside school, but typically in very different forms. Or perhaps it is better to say that they tend to be valued differently. Even in the case where the object produced in school is considered important (for instance, a good grade on a mathematics test, a strong report card, or an essay assigned a high value by a teacher), this object may still seem outside the frame of the kinds of things made by members of particular families.⁴ The things made in the academic field can be

⁴ In what sort of families are people subject to routine knowledge testing, prose writing, or global assessments of ability? These are, of course, corporate and bureaucratic practices and where they appear in the lives of working class adults, they are generally very concrete relating to specific work tasks. The object that is important "in school," may generate pride as Raymond Williams shows in *Border Country* (1960) in the sense that the people in the education system seem to value and appreciate the child for doing this work.

quite alien and of dubious value. As one of Mike's research participants commented, he "could never see the job that they were trying to get me to do in school."

The "job" that people try to get students to do in school (and in education more broadly) is worth interrogating. The types of school performance through which intelligence or gifts are most consequentially assessed, take the form of tests designed far from the context of where the learning takes place, and far from the circumstances in which things and meanings are made. They are assessments conducted at a distance, where rural communities for instance, are evaluated in relation to how they perform and compete with urban and suburban locales. We might speak of a gifted musician or even a gifted cook or mechanic, but for the most part, the powerful discourses around young people's gifts seem to be framed within the academic space, and particularly, in standardized test performance.

As Raymond Williams (1989) put it, "culture is ordinary" and we live in times and places that present the roster of tasks normally accomplished by people with whom we share space. Williams describes, for instance, the rural village where he was raised watching his ancestors move through generations from farm labourers to trade unionists. He writes that, "(T)o grow up in that (his) family was to see the shaping of minds; the learning of new skills, the shifting of relationships, the emergence of different language and ideas." (1989: 92). It is the very ordinariness of skilled accomplishments that is remarkable, but it is also the way that these ordinary acts can appear amazing to someone from outside the culture. Mike remembers watching a scallop fisherman weave a metal and rubber mesh drag, quickly and expertly. When he commented that what this man was doing is highly skilled work he snorted and replied that any fisherman does this as part of the job. What appeared as impossibly difficult work carried out on a deck that tilted sickeningly in below zero weather was, to this man, a totally ordinary, unskilled, mundane task. And of course, any fisherman would "see" this job and know how to do it. But the job the teachers were trying to get my research participant to do in school seemed as impossible and daunting as the weaving of that metal scallop drag would be to me.

School is an unusual place in the sense that it is generally considered a place that prepares children and youth for work, citizenship, and for life. In fact, one interpretation of the genesis of the school as an institution is the liberal view that children are sent to school as a moratorium from having to work (Erikson, 1994). School therefore, is the opposite of a job which is a specific engagement in a particular practice that can range from routinized industrial work, to service industry labour, to a professional or specialized technical career. Putting aside for a moment performativity measures and job readiness initiatives, in school, children are often treated as primarily as potential to be assessed. One measure of the development of a society is the length of schooling that is normal in that place; this is essentially the core of human capital arguments that are generally accepted as a proxy for modernity (Becker, 2009). Modern societies give young people a protracted experience of moratorium and an extended and intensive preparation in education and training outside the work force. Indeed, the highest earning portions of the population in advanced capitalist societies are those people who spend the longest time in this kind of moratorium (i.e. tertiary education), which is now normally extended into the middle-class individual's 20s or even 30s (Arnett, 2014).

It is no surprise any more that schools are not particularly good at incorporating the knowledge forms or "funds of knowledge" (Gonzales, Moll and Amante, 2005) represented in the experience of many rural children. This is something Dewey pointed out more than a century ago, and the problem persists. It is the rare teacher who is effective at incorporating the

knowledge forms in economically marginal, cultural minority, or racialized communities in a way that connects well with the official curriculum. In fairness, it has only been relatively recently that the standardized expectations relating to curriculum and pedagogy are designed to be responsive to the uniqueness of children and the (rural) places in which they live (Corbett, 2012). Of course, there are wonderful examples of this kind of culturally responsive teaching as it is now called, but the train of educational policy in most national contexts is simultaneously going in the opposite direction back toward the alienating, abstract, and standardized landscape that Dewey bemoaned so long ago. The place that seems to be imagined by contemporary educational policy is what might be called the metropolitan globe, i.e. the heavily urbanized areas of the advanced capitalist West. The space imagined here excludes the global south and the rural locale (Corbett, 2006; Connell, 2012). To theorize from the margins, be they the intellectual and physical landscape of rurality (Berry, 1977, 2001), or from the subaltern spaces of the global periphery (Connell, 2007; Spivak, 2013), is too rarely considered in the social sciences, and almost never considered in mainstream Anglophone educational analysis.

Intelligence itself then comes to be associated with metropolitan practices and middle class lifeways in metropolitan spaces. In the rural or aboriginal periphery, the central purpose of education is to inculcate. But culture is ordinary. In marginal spaces outside the metropolis there are often different definitions of what constitutes intelligence that do not involve the certified cultural capital that is offered and assessed in school. For instance, when Mike has asked people in the rural villages in which he has worked, “who is considered to be an intelligent person around here?” the examples he gets typically refer to individuals who are innovative and efficient in the ways they do ordinary things (Corbett, 2013). These people are valued for their ability to make things within the material circumstances around them. These are people who are “always thinking” and who can “gear something up” when they encounter problems. They are improvisers whose engagements relate to the pragmatic, concrete problems they encounter in their everyday lives. They are often described as people who know how to access information and “make things happen” by accessing new markets or seeing a trend before others do. They are classic rural entrepreneurs, which is also a proxy for being a survivor in many modern rural communities. They are very often resistant to the regulatory frameworks that constrain the lives of people living in rural locales. They can “get things done” because they “know how to get around the rules” by cunning, stealth or by directly confronting people in authority with “common sense.” This common sense, it must be said, is often juxtaposed in these conversations with irate descriptions of the absurdity of metrocentric big government and urban big business that generates procedures and roadblocks. It is this sensibility that makes it easier to understand the rise of Donald Trump and other protest movements that have strong rural roots, like Brexit, or Australia’s xenophobic One Nation.

Indeed, in rural, remote and regional communities schooling is often seen as just another set of rules to be followed. Most people now see that young people need the capital represented by educational credentials even if they find it difficult to see the pragmatic “ordinary” value of these credentials for doing the things they know about. At the same time, they often neither understand nor accept the assessments of themselves or their children as intellectually deficient. This struck me powerfully one day when I was driving one of my most challenging/challenged students to a school event in a nearby village. A vintage car passed us by and I commented, “there goes a 68 Impala.” The lad I was driving, who was at the time around 11 or 12 years of age said, “nope, it’s a 69.” “How do you know,” I asked? He responded with an elaborate discussion of how Chevrolet changed the taillights in the Impala from circular to rectangular in

1969. I asked him how he knew this and this child, who was pretty much considered to be a highly resistant non-reader told me about the stacks of car magazines he studied. This rather fine distinction that was useless knowledge in his schooling, illustrated both his gifts and the ordinariness of such gifts for males in his community.

Recognizing Rural Gifts

It is now well understood and widely accepted that intelligence is not an essential global phenomenon that reflects individual dispositions or innate abilities. That is true unless a narrow and culturally independent definition of intelligence reduces the “gift” to one of a brain that can process at speed. Next, if gifts are multiple, in the sense of the different forms of intelligence that Gardner and those who have followed in his footsteps propose, then it might be said that everyone is gifted in some way. Thirdly, the sociological view of the gift that follows from Bourdieu’s critique would situate ability in the context of habitual cultural practices. If gifts are social they become quite ordinary and situated in the time and place where they are acquired and used. There are place-specific rural gifts that allow people in these communities to speak of the born and bred fisherman or the woman who has farming in her blood (Heldke, 2006).

Still, the field of gifted education might have something to contribute to the general improvement of education in rural areas. The sociological critique we offer above effectively supports Dewey’s foundational contention that an effective education proceeds from experience, but it does not end there. From experience, an education moves from the ordinary habitual practice in the cultural landscape of the learner to more elaborate reflection on that practice. Children live in places and tend to do the things that we see happening around them with the tools at hand. This is how Mike’s student came to see the distinction between the taillights of the Impala and why he could take apart a wheel cylinder to change brakes in his early teens. How can his culture-specific gifts come to be recognized and celebrated, and then built upon, rather than virtually ignored as it was through his schooling? One answer is a vocational education. But there are others that perhaps involve a wider range of possibilities, knowledge forms, and engagements.

The identification of rural gifts might involve more than an analysis of generic problem solving or information processing exercises. This is precisely the form of assessment that the car-savvy student was subject to on an ongoing basis, and which he failed miserably, time and again. The unfortunate result of his repeated failure in these assessments is that the curriculum offered to him was founded on remedial pedagogies meant to correct his assumed deficiencies in information processing. In other words, he got a lot of literacy and numeracy in the form of phonics, grammar instruction, and remedial work in basic arithmetic algorithms. Little wonder school appeared to him as irrelevant and bizarre at best, and a kind of torture at worst. Little wonder he was as resistant, taking every opportunity to run interference on his teachers, and quitting as soon as he could.

The recognition of his gifts would have taken an engagement on the part of his teachers in his cultural world. It would have meant taking seriously the funds of knowledge in which he was immersed (and they were not). It would have taken humility, creativity and openness on the part of the system and its actors who would themselves have to become students of people and place. The boy’s rural identity and his masculine immersion in car culture were read as markers of his alterity in the academic field. The development and enrichment of his gifts would require a curriculum that takes into consideration the environment in which he lives and thinks. It would

also open the educational world up to him as one in which Ingold's (2013) "making" was at the centre of the curriculum instead of the steady diet of sitting and "doing nothing" (as he put it) that he had come to associate with schooling. He might have enjoyed, for instance, a rich experientially based curriculum that is common in gifted programming and the exclusive schools this boy never saw.

The Last Word to Nathan

To this point the principal voice in this text has been predominantly Mike's. It is the voice of a middle-class parent from a rural community struggling with a kind of liberal guilt that recognizes, on the one hand, the inequities that a recognition of cultural capital creates while at the same time wanting to support a child in school. Nathan provides not only a counterpoint to Mike's sociological narrative, offering balance to the difficult decisions faced by middle class parents navigating the ubiquitous educational "choices" they confront. These choices include both picking schools (in situations where this is possible) and demanding special programs for their children. In this account, there is ambivalence and a focus on the emotional costs associated with the alterity that special programming can and often does represent.

Nathan has gone on to complete schooling, three university degrees, including one in medicine. From a small rural high school where he was tracked through STEM programs, he has continued in that stream, studying science through his undergraduate and graduate university programs. He has "succeeded" by moving out of his rural community, through a university career, and on to training as a clinician scientist. He has used his gifts, but he argues, his gifts have also used him. The text now shifts to Nathan's voice and he issues a different sort of cautionary tale about giftedness for parents struggling with the inevitable tensions they face in supporting their children. This is one story of rural giftedness and its consequences.

I can recall vividly the day a tweed-jacketed man with a moustache came to the small elementary school in our village. Through the course of a day, students were shepherded out of our grade 1 class to a room where this pleasant fellow watched us perform a number of tasks. I can't recall the details, but I do remember the tester being very happy about what I had done. To me, that's what giftedness is: an external judgement leveled on you by someone else, based on what they (or their evaluation instruments ... or both) value. In the village where I grew up, the strongest epithet youths lobbed at each other was "don't judge me", usually followed by "you don't know me". Thus, in school, all judgement-centric situations were either avoided or defied, and many students were shunted into "SPED" classes (slang for special education). I won't pretend that I stood in solidarity with the predominantly working class children who got this diagnosis. Some were my tormentors, even abusers, but I understand now the kind of pain they must have been in. They were literally telling me how "we" (I probably represented more than just another kid) hurt them: with judgement. We were all learning that schooling is about judgement. I did not know how to listen, and a gifted label did nothing to help me with that; maybe just the opposite. Perhaps it encouraged me not just to see myself as different, but also to judge and see people as categories rather than as complex, multidimensional human beings.

In my teen years I shook off the gifted label, skipped a lot of school, and got to know all sorts of people, but always as an outsider. I wasn't comfortable with the privileged, nor with the disadvantaged. My 'gifted' life has been liminal, or perhaps interstitial, like that of my father an outsider intellectual in a rural village. As such, I have had more time to pursue my academic and professional interests, but I have also suffered from a relative poverty of social connectedness

that someone from the village where I grew up would find sad, if not unbearable. People from my rural childhood home have told me spending a lifetime in “school,” as I have done, would be unthinkable and they wonder why I have done it.

My conclusion is that an inclusive school system might prepare the next generation of professionals to be more sensitive and effective, less isolated and self-righteous too perhaps. I think when we focus on separating “categories” of young people we waste precious opportunities to improve our society on a daily basis, starting in our schools. I was faced with frustrated and angry classmates who were streamed into remedial classes, further alienating them. Their frustration, in turn, affected the school environment and made it difficult for a lot of people in my school to get the best education they could.

If optimal instruction for gifted rural students is only possible through separation, taking the child out of the regular classroom, and later, the community itself; that is a very sad thing. What I mean to say is that a kind of academic apartheid found in most schools (including the one I attended) is a cause of suffering for all concerned. In an elite school, I would have missed my family. At my own school, I think I missed a peaceful youth. I don’t look back on my school years fondly, on the whole, and I think I’m not alone, as suicide and teen mental health statistics can attest. Slavoj Žižek (2008) glibly states in a *YouTube* snippet that love is an act of violence, a brutal separating out of something from everything else. Perhaps giftedness, too, is a form of violence masquerading as care, which is what Bourdieu (1984) seems to suggest.

I also think I missed something important in my schooling, something practical and concrete that academic students are steered away from. Over the past several years, while studying medicine, I’ve been learning how to fix my car from people like my erstwhile ‘unsuccessful’ schoolmates on *YouTube*. After banging on stuck bolts, learning how to use an impact wrench, and replacing most of the running components on an old car, I have a new perspective on education not unlike that proposed by Crawford (2010) in *Shop Class as Soulcraft*. I wish I could go back and demand to take shop class, because it teaches about life in a way no physics textbook ever did. It could also have meant that I would have had something in common with those young men and women in high school, whom I clearly didn’t understand. They and I lost something, an opportunity to work together, communicate and grow as people who see society as a whole rather than in terms of a binary “us” and “them”. It took me a long time to begin unlearning that divide, something anyone in the medical profession must do. I hear a lot about education working well for “bright” children, and how these children need to be “challenged” and effectively separated from their allegedly less intelligent peers who have been brought into the mainstream of an allegedly inclusive school system. I can only speak from my experience, but perhaps it is the allegedly bright children who need inclusion and integration most of all in the end.

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